

California Historical Quarterly

Fall 1972



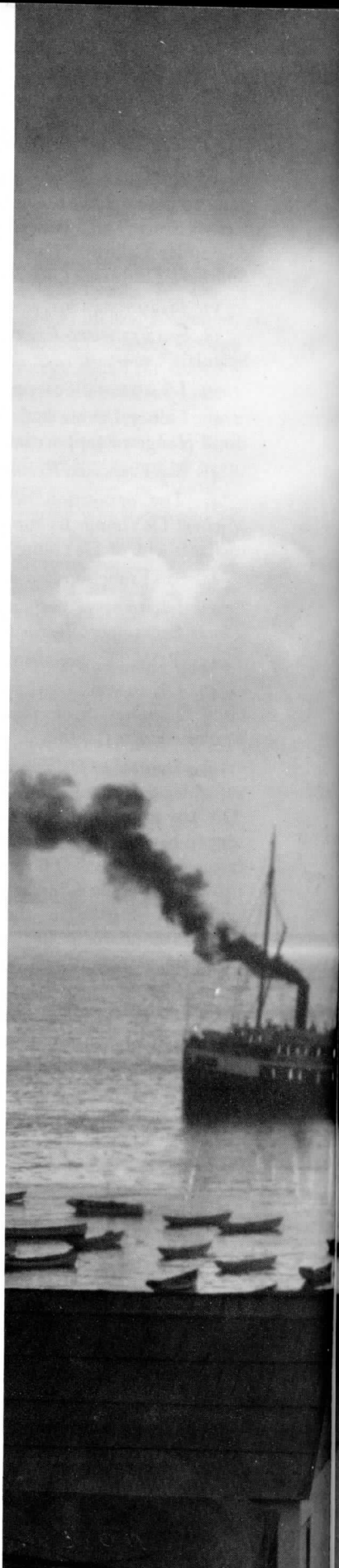
OLD VILLAGE, YOSEMITE VALLEY, 1915

This island Santa Catalina was a jewel in the sea...

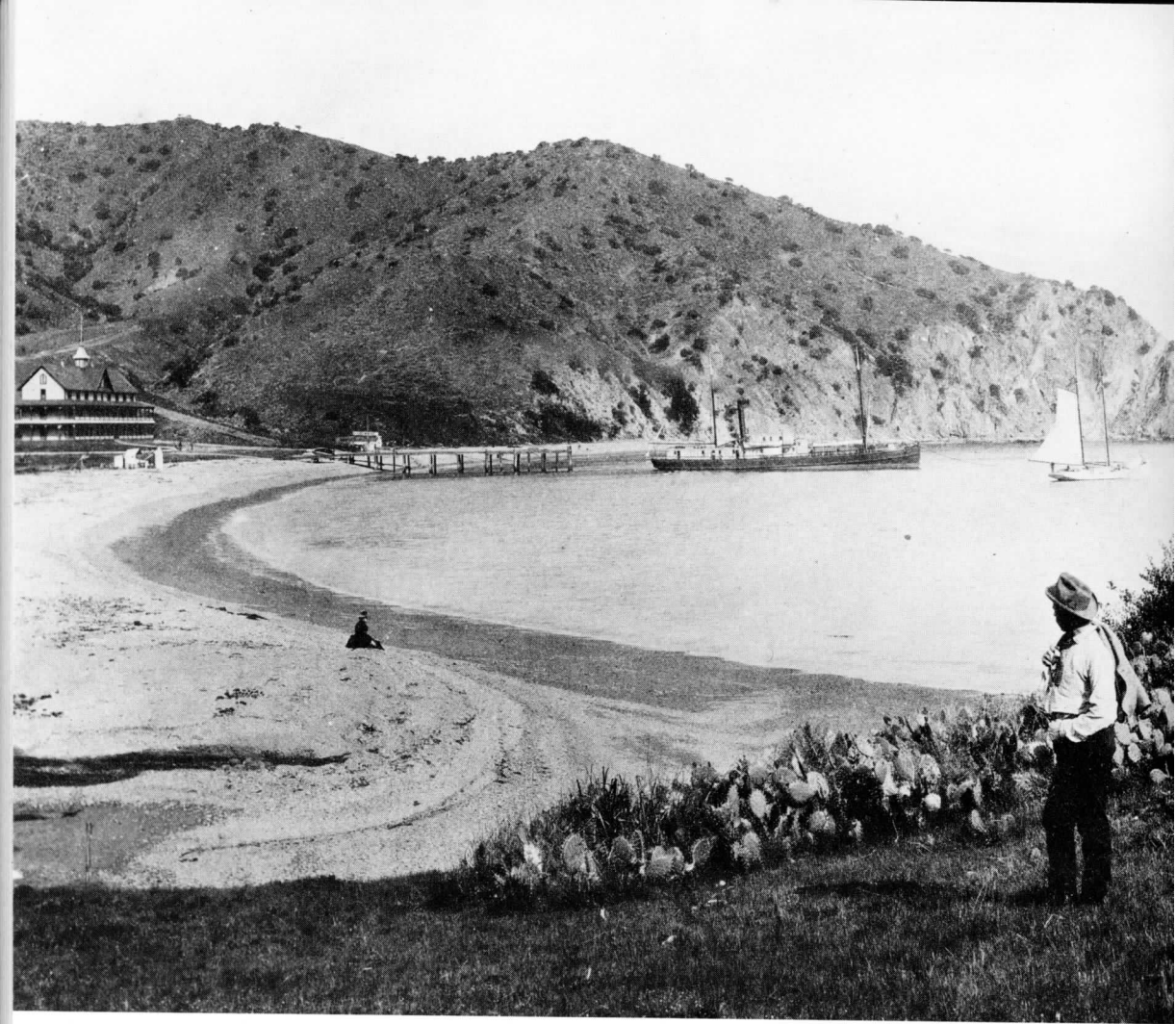
by Robert A. Weinstein

NOT VERY MANY Southern Californians took vacations in the late 1800's. An affluent middle class had not yet emerged and vacationing was largely the privilege of the wealthy. Although the resorts of Southern California were exclusive the best of them, La Jolla, Santa Barbara and Del Mar, were so well known they enjoyed national fame. They were patronized in the winter by the same people who enjoyed Bar Harbor, Saratoga and Newport, Rhode Island in the sweltering Eastern summers.

Relaxation was required for workmen and storekeepers as well and, while there were no jet planes, package tours to far away places or "fly-now, pay-later" plans, picnics and buggy rides were popular. There were no Hawaii's readily available then and a tour of the world was unthinkable for most people. For the late nineteenth-century Southern Californian the world was small and the sea offered tem-

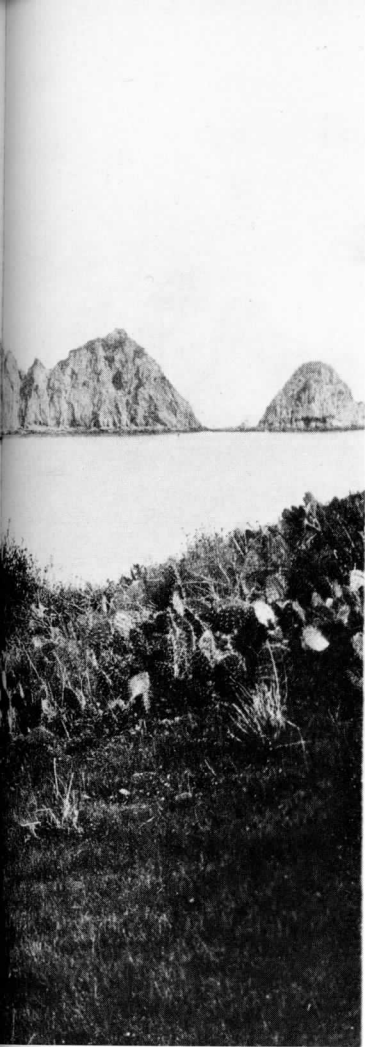






porary escape. The Pacific's restless waters provided the sea-borne traveler with a salutary dash of salt air, ocean wind, and frightening fog. Best of all, this oceanic world offered a chain of offshore islands, some easily approached by boat. Of the five islands, the chief jewel was Santa Catalina, a scant 21 sea miles southwest of Los Angeles' seaport, San Pedro.

Catalina's vacationland potential for Southern California was not long overlooked. Affording a natural lee from Pacific gales, the island had a history of random uses by Yankee shipmasters, Mexican smugglers, sheep-owning farmers and itinerant adventurers. Regular sea traffic with the mainland was established in 1886 by the Bannings to assure a clientele for the island's first inn, The Metropole Hotel, built by George R. Shatto in the island cove called Avalon. The hotel attracted further building activity that soon transformed the little cove into a



Isolated in beauty, host to infrequent visitors, the tiny shelving cove at Avalon Harbor offered shelter and a safe anchorage for passing seamen and visiting Southland yachtsmen.

Magnificent in lonely splendor, George R. Shatto's Metropole Hotel at Avalon promised and delivered, first-rate ocean fishing from rowboats, unforgettable sunrises and sunsets, clean sea air and quiet rest for the weary.







Six husky horses and a jolting stagecoach offered bone-breaking glimpses of wooded hills and brush-covered valleys to the determined visitor.

budding island village. Entertainment for visitors then was rugged. It consisted mainly of hiking over the island hills, swimming, sailing, fishing, boar hunting and primitive camping. The island's popularity grew as an accessible, inexpensive resort, and visitors multiplied rapidly. They came in private sailboats and finally in steam tugs chartered for that purpose.

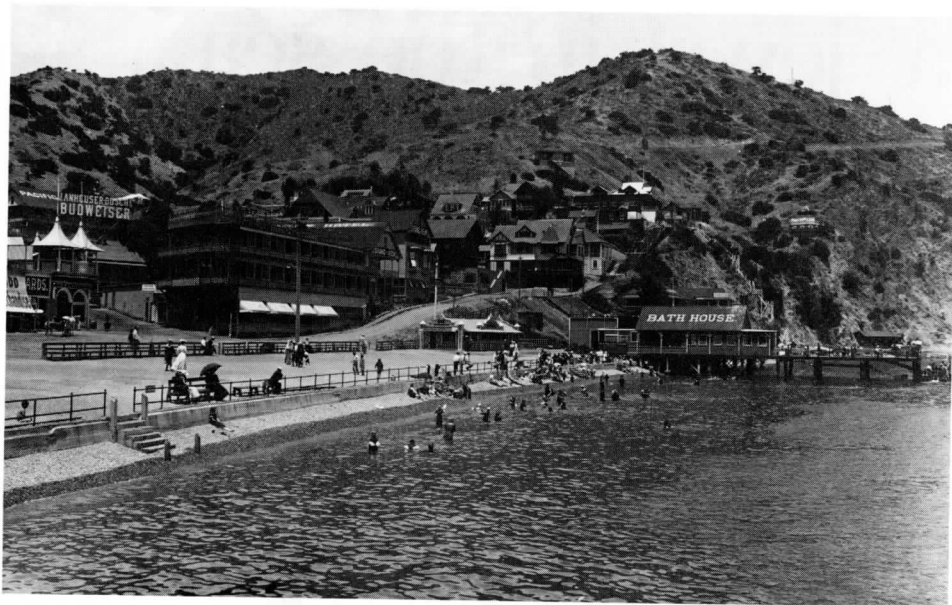
To shelter and entertain the growing throngs of tourists, promoters rapidly developed the island's resources. They organized a tiny city at Avalon, a city of tents and rustic pleasures. They climbed towering Sugar Loaf Rock and built an observation platform on its crest, a lookout point reached by climbing more than a hundred rickety wooden steps. They built roads over the hills and brought a stage coach and horses to the island to tour the dusty roads. They built wharves, piers, bath houses and boardwalks and even specially designed glass-bottomed boats to explore the "submarine gardens." They built larger ships to bring more tourists,



*The sea-visitors mecca
was Tent City at Avalon.
Dependably drafty, dusty
and utterly lacking in
any kind of privacy
it loomed in popular
esteem as a wonderfully
permissive local island paradise.*

more comfortably to Avalon's hilly beauty. The village grew, spreading back up into the hills, climbing the encircling slopes of the bay.

As Los Angeles grew, so did the fame of Avalon, of Catalina. It became the poor man's South Sea island. A trip across the Catalina Channel on the Great White Steamer was fashioned into legend and no visit to Southern California was considered complete without it. As fashions changed, the rustic pleasures of Catalina gave way to more sophisticated ones and dance pavilions and name bands became solid attractions. Yachtsmen sailed for Avalon and the Isthmus as bees fly to a hive, and as Los Angeles burst into the mid-twentieth century, the once-lonely, shelving cove at Avalon on Catalina Island had become a prosperous model of a Southern California beach resort.



Southern California's competitor to Atlantic City's renowned boardwalk was the beach strand at Avalon. This "place," wide, smooth and naked to the hot sun suited almost every taste from exercise to quick romance.



The Great White Steamers brought eager passengers and assorted jazz lovers impatient to listen and dance to the music of Guy Lombardo, Benny Goodman and other legendary name bands at Avalon's famous Casino.